THE TURNING POINT
Luke 2:22-35
January 3, 1982

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

One of the things you must do with a new baby is introduce him or her to grandparents or great-grandparents, just as soon as possible. It is an encounter which is full of significance and, I have always thought, surprising power. Young parents play their role almost instinctively. The infant is brought to the patriarch or matriarch, placed in open arms, and the parents are surprised at the steadiness and expertise of the old hands which know well how to do this job. The great-grandparent discreetly inspects the infant, jostles and then transfers to the shoulder - better to feel the length and strength of the little body, then back to cradled arm, safely, smoothly to pose for the photograph. It's an important moment. As I look at the photographs now I wonder what they were thinking, and I conclude that it was probably not unlike something an old man once said when he held in his arms Mary's eight-day old baby:

"Lord lettest now thy servant depart in peace....
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation..."

I was surprised in a seminar recently when members of the group were asked to write down the number of years they expected to live. It was not a particularly happy thought, but as Dr. Johnson once observed, nothing so concentrates the mind as the thought of hanging. It did bring some perspective and helpful clarity. Next we were asked to write down what we hoped to accomplish or experience. Some of the responses were whimsical, creative, intriguing: some wanted to jump out of airplanes, climb mountains, write books, see the world. As a serious postscript, almost everyone included some hope for a feeling that progress had been made, that something had been accomplished, that the enterprise of living and striving and hoping and working and loving had added up to something of some value. Almost everyone, in addition to skydiving, mountain climbing and book writing included some hope that peace might be closer, life more gentle, and the Kingdom of God a little stronger. It reminded me, frankly, of old Simeon holding that baby.

Something of the same dynamic happens every time we baptise a child. There are a lot of sound theological reasons for the Presbyterian preference for infant baptism, celebrated publicly, in the context of a public worship service. One of the important, but unheralded results is that a marvelous and powerful dynamic of relationship is stimulated. Some deep reservoir of hope is tapped when an infant is held in our midst and all of us experience something not unlike Simeon:

"Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace..."

It was eight days after the birth. Mary and Joseph were in the Temple with their new baby as the law prescribed. They were there for the ceremonial purifying and cleansing required of mothers. They brought Jesus along to present him to God in a traditional act of sacrifice. The law required a lamb, but if the parents could not afford that extravagance, a pair of turtle doves was acceptable as a substitute. That is the setting for the incident. In the Temple they met Simeon, described as a righteous and devout man, watching for Israel's consolation. The words he said as he held the infant Jesus, are among the church's priceless treasures. For something like 1,500 years they have been repeated daily throughout the Christian world in the Nunc Dimittus, the church's evening prayer.

I'm very fond of this brief incident. Nowhere is the Gospel more commonly human than in the touching encounter between the old man and new baby. When theology becomes obtuse, when the church feels trivial, when the Kingdom seems remote, Christianity still has its humanism, its celebration of the strength and beauty of humanity,

at its core.....I'm fond of it, in addition, because the account of this encounter suggests a method and a place for faith to take root, not in the extraordinary, flashy, but namely in the common, the everyday, the ordinary, the human.

Simeon was making an important theological suggestion when he saw God's salvation in the infant Jesus. Certainly no one else thought of looking to the son of a peasant carpenter for Israel's redemption. Messianic expectations were classic, predictable: the savior would come in the clouds, or at least riding a white war horse. His purpose, as it was commonly understood, was very simply to restore the Davidic monarchy to the throne in Jerusalem. In order to do that he would have to drive out the Romans. That's what the Messiah was for. That was the content of the most passionate longing, waiting and praying for his appearance. The dedication of a peasant baby is not, frankly, the logical place to begin looking.

From the outset, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has shown itself to be in sharp contrast to common expectations, even the fondest hopes of the religious people. The birth of Jesus didn't fit the prototype Messianic arrival. Jesus the man certainly didn't measure up to criteria endorsed by all the important people of society. In fact, his claim was so incongruous, so bizarre, so out of sync, some thought him demented, others concluded he was dangerous, and all agreed that society would be well served by his death.

At the beginning Simeon, some shepherds and a few mysterious astrologers could see God's presence in the ordinary. It is the characteristic Christian secret.

Part, also, of what old Simeon saw in the infant in his arms was that nothing was ever going to be the same again. This infant would precipitate conflict, his mission would hinge on the always uncomfortable necessity of making difficult decisions. "Set for the rise and the fall of many" is the way Simeon put it. And the dynamic began immediately. Herod reacted vigorously, cruelly, by ordering the execution of all the new babies in the area. In order to avoid conflict and suffering, the Magi had to return to their homes by another route. Jesus, contrary to what the cultural celebration of his birth seems to say about him, is not all sweetness and light. T.S. Eliot, in his marvelous poem, The Journey of the Magi, has one of them reflecting on how it was after they discovered the infant...

"We returned to our places, these kingdoms..
But no longer at home here, in the
old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching
their gods..."

In the pleasant aftermath of Christmas, Simeon warns us that Christianity will be demanding, divisive, controversial: that the nature of the faith is to confront the individual and the structures of society in a way that simply rules out placid neutrality and commands a decision.

The Spanish mystic Unamuno said it beautifully:
"May God deny you peace but give you glory."
And Dean William Inge had a clear word for us when he said:
"A generation which wishes for a religion without tears must find it difficult to adjust to the New Testament"
(The Interpreters Bible, P64, Vol. 8)

What we engage this morning, appropriately - as the New Year begins, is the early awareness that the birth of this child is a turning point. What we confront

this morning is the promise that God will confront us: one, in the ordinariness of life, and two, in ways which will force us to make hard decisions. The popular expectations of religion will still be expressed in images like the Lord "walking with me and talking with me and telling me I am his own," just as the first century allowed its religious hope to degenerate in a mythical vision of the Messiah descending in the clouds. Popular religion will still clamor about ecstatic experiences of the Holy Spirit, in the same way that the Zealots waited for and expected the unmistakably powerful Christ to arrive on a war horse and organize the revolution. Popular religion is still suggesting that Jesus Christ confronts people for the sake of their good feelings of salvation, or spiritual excitement. But what we engage this morning is the promise that God choses the ordinary, and that to be part of the confrontation is to be required to make a decision.

May I suggest the ways it happens. It can be in the form of an ethical quandary. This life of ours is complex. We must confront moral challenges which no one before us has had to confront. We are faced with incredible ambiguity in medical ethics, for instance, in the availability of abortion. We are forced today to face the hard fact of economic reality, while at the same time dealing responsibly with poor people. Those issues may I suggest, are the form, the shape and the plane for our confrontation with Jesus Christ.

And sometimes it may be a sense of judgment; the deep knowledge that we have acted expediently, not faithfully, for instance; that distressing, nagging guilt when we sell out a bit. Our confrontation with Jesus Christ can be the unaccountable disease we feel whenever we have not lived up to our potential. Or, it can be a surprising gesture of love, an unexpected joy, a gracious, serendipitous act of healing, forgiving, reconciling.

God's love choses the ordinary. God's love takes the ordinary and transforms it. God's kingdom comes in a new baby, in the commonne s of life, and when it appears it requires a decision.

I invite your decision today.....We come to table. We come to affirm that God can make the common elements of bread and wine into a sacrament of love. We come together to celebrate his presence, his promise and his demand. We come to the common table in the certainty that our decision to be faithful, to follow, is all he needs to make our lives into something new and strong and good.

Simeon held an infant in his arms and knew that the turning point had come. What better place for us to be on the first Sunday of this New Year.

AMEN.

O God, we have seen your salvation. We have celebrated it according to our custom. Now urge us on to a new day of commitment, decisive faith, and effective service: through Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN.